

Ghosts of Christmas Past

by

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FADE IN.

INT. THE BRENNAN LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

There's little room on the mantelpiece for Christmas decoration. A few candy canes and tinsel reflect light from the fireplace below.

Family photos take up much of the space. There are a lot of them:

- A middle aged man wears a fishing vest. He hugs a ten year old boy.

- The same boy mugs for the camera, poised over a Red Rider sled.

- A shot of the man in a recliner, a pipe in his mouth. He sports more grey hair this time, and more wrinkles.

- A teenaged boy holds his diploma out to the camera. The man, his hair now snow white, rests an arm on his shoulder.

A snow globe sits at the end of the mantelpiece. Bits of confetti float in the liquid, and cover the snowman encased inside.

EXT. CEMETARY - AFTERNOON

It's snowing - hard.

BRIAN (35) bends down, and brushes slush from a tombstone. His glasses are somewhat icy as well.

Rangy and lean, he wears a battered tan trench coat, only a few shades lighter than his hair.

DANIELLE (37) stands a few feet behind, and watches somberly. Tall and blonde, her straight hair falls back over the shoulders of her overcoat.

BRIAN
Merry Christmas, Dad.

Brian wipes sleet from the face of the stone. Engraved letters read "Richard W. Brennan. Loving Husband and Father. May 2, 1924 - May 10, 2000."

BRIAN

You should have seen our tree this year. We cut it down from Battenfields, just like you always did. Seven footer - had to cut some off before it fit the ceiling. No room for the angel when we stood it up.

A Christmas blanket lies to his right. He places it before the headstone gently.

BRIAN

You know, Barney still looks for you. He won't play catch with anyone else. Whenever he hears a sound, he goes running for the door.

Brian pauses in thought.

BRIAN

Okay, maybe not running. He's getting old too, you know...

He glances at Danielle for support, and she smiles.

BRIAN

It won't be the same without you, Dad. We miss you. But Merry Christmas. We'll remember the traditions. I promise.

Brian SIGHS, and brushes snow from the tombstone one last time. He looks toward Danielle, and gives her a nod. She puts her arm around him, and they turn to leave.

INT. CAR - EVENING

The snowfall drives heavily against the windshield.

Brian sits behind the wheel, Danielle in the passenger seat. The SWISH of wipers is the only sound in the car.

DANIELLE

You okay?

Brian nods his head, his eyes locked on the road.

BRIAN

I'll be fine. I thought Exit 6 would be coming up by now...

A station wagon cuts in front, a little too close for comfort. Brian grimaces, and slaps the wheel in irritation.

BRIAN
Signal would be nice. Asshole.

The two lapse into silence.

They turn off the highway, onto Exit 6. The TIK TIK of the car's signal seems awfully loud.

After a moment, Brian smiles faintly at Danielle.

BRIAN
You know, when I was a kid, my dad had this Christmas tradition. Every year, we'd go ice fishing. Never caught anything - not that it mattered much. Then we'd go to Sarnies for a huge Italian dinner. Mom didn't have to cook, and no-one had to clean up afterwards. When we got back, we'd light the tree and open a gift - just one. Then head to bed.

Brian draws a deep breath.

BRIAN
It's just - he was always there. He took care of us. He did so much, and now...

Brian's voice cracks, as his words trail off. Danielle puts a gentle hand on his knee.

DANIELLE
He knew you loved him, Brian. And you did everything you could. It's Christmas, and he'd want you to be happy.

She gives her husband a look of encouragement.

DANIELLE
We've got the tree at home. A few gifts. A little wine...

Brian smiles weakly.

BRIAN
And a little Barney to be walked. I know. I promise I'll lighten up. Sorry for the mood.

Danielle shakes her head, to dismiss his concern. Brian holds out his free hand, which she takes in hers.

INT. THE BRENNAN LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Brian and Danielle lie on the floor beneath a Christmas tree, surrounded by presents. String lights twinkle. Brian holds a wine glass as Danielle unwraps a box.

It's a Labrador ornament, similar in color to BARNEY - a chunky yellow lab who lies a few feet away.

BRIAN

Well?

Danielle eyes the gift critically.

DANIELLE

He's cute. A little thinner than the original.

She makes a move towards the pile of presents.

DANIELLE

This one's Barney's. Let me get another...

Brian intercepts her hand.

BRIAN

No, just one. Remember, that's the rule. You don't like it?

He picks up the ornament, and examines it from several angles. He holds it up to Barney for comparison.

Danielle takes the ornament from Brian's hand, and kisses it on the nose.

DANIELLE

No, I like it a lot. Thanks.

She follows up with a more passionate kiss to Brian. They snuggle, the presents forgotten.

DANIELLE

I just don't see why we have to wait til morning.

BRIAN

I told you. Tradition's very important in the Brennan household. Especially at Christmas.

Danielle pouts.

DANIELLE

We never waited when we were kids.

BRIAN

Your family also had a Chanukah bush.
Bunch of radicals. Tonight, we wait.

He cuddles closer.

BRIAN

Besides, we have better things to do than
unwrap gifts.

Danielle relaxes in his arms.

DANIELLE

It's good to see you happy. I was
getting worried.

Brian SIGHS, and puts down his glass.

BRIAN

I'm sorry. It's just...the first
Christmas without him here. I can
practically feel his absence.

Brian looks to the fireplace. Lights from the tree
bounce off the family photos.

BRIAN

Dad was the one that was big on
tradition. Every year the fishing, and
the night out. And each year he'd put
out a glass of milk and cookies for
Santa. Gone in the morning, of course.

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. THE BRENNAN LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Dressed in sleeper pajamas, YOUNGER BRIAN (7) stands in
the kitchen doorway, unnoticed by his father.

RICHARD BRENNAN (52) sits in his recliner with a plate of
cookies on his lap. A glass of milk is in his hand.

BRIAN (V.O.)

I actually believed it until I was seven.
Then I snuck into the living room one
night, and caught him at it. He didn't
see me, and I never told him. He
actually continued the tradition until I
left for college.

BACK TO PRESENT.

Brian hugs Danielle closer.

BRIAN
I think he knew I'd figured it out by then.

DANIELLE
Your dad was a great guy.

BRIAN
I know. I wish you'd gotten to know him when he was younger. He had a lot more energy back then.

Brian stands up; reaches a hand down to Danielle.

BRIAN
But enough of that. I think it's time for bed.

He leers comically, as Danielle takes a few steps towards the bedroom.

DANIELLE
Give me a moment. I'll get the Santa suit!

Brian raises an eyebrow.

BRIAN
Be right in. Let me clean up a sec.

Brian bends down, and retrieves wrapping paper from the floor. He turns off the tree, and carries the glasses to the sink.

On a whim, he pours a glass of milk and finds a cookie - places both on an end table, next to the couch.

DANIELLE (O.S.)
Hellllloooo!

The faint sound of JINGLING echoes from the bedroom.

Brian smiles, and heads towards the sound of bells.

INT. THE BRENNAN LIVING ROOM - LATER

There's unexpected movement on the mantelpiece. A storm rages inside the snow globe, as if recently shaken.

The winding key turns a few CLICKS. Slurred NOTES of Jingle Bells are heard before it falls silent.

In the darkened room, the clock TICKS loudly.

The glass on the end table lies on it's side. Drops of milk coat the surface, sprinkled with cookie crumbs.

Barney races through the room. Chases his tennis ball, and BUMPS loudly into furniture.

Brian appears in the doorway, wearing a cotton bathrobe. His glasses are in his hand.

BRIAN

Barney! Hey numbskull, know what time it is?

Brian inches into the living room, and feels around blindly.

BRIAN

What, is your water dish empty again?

The tennis ball lies at Brian's feet. He reaches down to retrieve it, puts his glasses on as he stands up. The milk glass is at eye level.

Brian freezes.

BRIAN

What...?

After a moment, the confusion on his face fades.

BRIAN

Barney, dammit!

He pats the carpet at the foot of the table. It's dry. He picks up the glass - a bewildered look on his face. Brian wanders to the kitchen, glass in hand.

BRIAN

Buddy, if that was chocolate chip, you're on your own...

Brian sets the glass in the sink, and turns back towards the living room.

As he passes the archway, the tree lights flare brightly. Brian jumps back, startled.

BRIAN

Aaaa!

Lights on the tree continue to flicker, and cast shadows on the nearby couch.

There appears to be an indentation; as if someone has just left the seat...or has yet to get up.

Brian stares at the air above the cushion. It looks somehow wrong; the light bends in odd ways.

BRIAN

Now I'm just losing it.

He reaches a hand towards the couch. He changes his mind, and pulls back before making contact.

BRIAN

A bit of undigested beef, perhaps...

Blue wisps of smoke curl in the air. Brian's gaze follows the trail, but nothing's there. He looks at the couch dubiously.

BRIAN

Dad?

Brian's eyes never leave the couch. He lowers himself into the recliner, and sits facing the shadows.

BRIAN

Well, I didn't have that much to drink.

He glances towards the bedroom.

BRIAN

So either the pressure's gotten to me, or this is the most vivid nightmare I've ever had.

Barney approaches the couch on his belly. He whines, and wags his tail submissively.

A look of horror spreads over Brian's face.

BRIAN

Guess pinching myself isn't going to do any good.

He falls silent, and stares at the shadows in front of him.

BRIAN

It is you, isn't it?

His gaze falls on the photos above the fireplace.

BRIAN

It's funny. You know how many times I wished I could just talk to you again? Tell you how sorry I was, and that I wished I could do it over. And I knew I'd never get the chance, because you're gone. Because you're dead...and you don't get second chances from the dead.

He shivers, and looks away.

BRIAN

I wouldn't be surprised if you were here to condemn me. I deserve it.

FLASH BACK TO:

INT. NURSING HOME WARD - DAY

Brian and Danielle stand in the hallway, on either side of Richard's wheelchair. He's slumped in the chair - looks thin and worn.

They speak to him for a few moments (MOS). Danielle rests a hand on his shoulder.

Then they turn and walk away, leaving Richard with a UNIFORMED ATTENDANT.

BRIAN (V.O.)

I should have done more.

BACK TO PRESENT.

BRIAN

So damn me to hell. I won't resist.

Brian stares towards the couch. After a moment, his face softens.

BRIAN

Or at least say something. Please?

The silence is deafening. Brian reaches out again, but loses his courage. He rises to pace the floor.

BRIAN

We really did try, Dad. When you started failing...and we got the diagnosis.

He gestures as he walks. His hands flail with frustration.

BRIAN

We got the home health aide through Medicare, and drove up every weekend. And then you got worse.

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

At the table, Brian spoon feeds his father. Richard turns red, and begins to cough.

BRIAN (V.O.)

You couldn't swallow too well anymore.

INT. BATHROOM - LATER

Brian guides an unsteady Richard to the bathroom. The older man lowers himself down, balanced on the rail assists.

Brian kneels, and hands a towelette to Richard.

BRIAN (V.O.)

You couldn't do a lot of things.

BACK TO PRESENT.

Brian stops, his voice soft.

BRIAN

But hey, you did the same for me when I was a kid.

He looks down at his feet. A bit of tinsel is tangled around his toes. Brian shakes it loose, and resumes pacing.

BRIAN

Mom was gone, and you couldn't stay at home anymore. So we sold the house. And we talked about moving you in with us...really, we did. But we were both working, and you would have been at home with the aide. We looked for the best place we could, and told ourselves that it was so you could have more supervision.

He stops and stares at the couch.

BRIAN

But was it really that? Or maybe we
didn't want to make the extra effort?

Brian collapses into the recliner, his face racked with
pain and guilt.

BRIAN

We could have brought you home. Or I
could have quit my job, and we could have
moved in with you. With the aide, we
could have made it work. Danielle would
have understood.

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. NURSING HOME DINING HALL - DAY

Richard is fed by an AIDE, his arms useless at his sides.

The aide wheels him back to his room, and positions the
chair to face a flickering TV. He leaves him alone.

BRIAN (V.O.)

And the worst part is that you never lost
your faculties. You knew what was
happening. And you knew where you were.
Everything considered...

BACK TO PRESENT.

BRIAN

...it was actually a blessing when the
cancer came.

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Brian and Danielle stand over Richard's hospital bed,
crying. The elder man is comatose. Tubes snake from his
arms and face, attached to monitors.

BRIAN (V.O.)

You never regained consciousness. I
failed you. Hell, I failed Mom, too.
When she died, I owed it to her to take
care of you.

START MONTAGE:

- YOUNG BRIAN roughhouses with his father.

- The pair fish together. Two sets of bare feet dangle off the edge of a pier.

- Clips of a family movie, grainy and grey. Richard mugs for the camera, hugs young Brian to his chest.

END MONTAGE.

BACK TO PRESENT.

Brian stares at the couch.

BRIAN

It was the least I could have done.

He lapses into silence, as the shadows on the couch shift subtly. Brian waits, but no response is forthcoming.

BRIAN

So that's it? What do we do now?

He shakes his head, bleakly.

BRIAN

No matter what I say, I can't change what I did. Or didn't do. So there's no absolution. And I can't ask your forgiveness.

Tears streak his face.

BRIAN

But I did love you, Dad. I really did. And I hope, in the end, that you knew it.

Impulsively, Brian reaches out again for the couch.

His hand comes in contact with only leather. Emboldened, he pats down the remaining cushions. There's nothing there. Only shadows.

Brian stands over the couch, and mutters to himself.

BRIAN

So I am nuts, after all. Serves me right.

He hovers for a moment, then turns away.

BRIAN

Come on, Barney. Let's go.

Brian leaves for the bedroom, drained and exhausted.

INT. THE BRENNAN LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS.

In the darkened room, the lights on the tree continue to flicker, and reflect off ornaments and shiny wrapping paper. Under the tree are several boxes, decorated with bows.

Nestled in their midst is a gold covered placard, shaped like a Red Rider sled. Emblazoned on it is an inscription: "To the best son a father could have. No regrets. Love, Dad."

The lights on the tree go out - this time, for good.

FINAL FADE-OUT.